

Talking With Children About God

by Marilyn Spaw Krock

A major thrust of early childhood faith formation is getting people comfortable about "God-talk." I still remember back to 1980 when I first attended a faith formation workshop on preschoolers. We were told to talk with the children about the wonders and goodness of God. I thought I would never be able to do it, but with practice it became easier - and then natural - and pretty soon my friends thought I had been "born again."

Growing up Catholic, I learned to memorize many prayers. When invited to say grace at the home of my Baptist aunt, all I could do was recite "Bless Us, O Lord." She would speak the most beautiful prayers from her heart which always included each of us by name, special intentions and blessings. I envied her gift. I am slowly beginning to get better at "spontaneous prayer."

When children are young teaching them to pray from their heart is so easy. Memorizing words that are not in their natural vocabulary, or signs that hold no significance to them is an exercise in futility. Listen sometime for phrases like: "Hail Mary, full of GRAPES," "blessed is the FRUIT OF THE LOOM," "Our Father, WHO'S ART IS in heaven," "and PIECES OF people on earth." They fill in what doesn't make sense with something that does!

Teaching spontaneous prayers of praise and thanksgiving are not only easier, they are more appropriate and build a stronger foundation for future spiritual growth. Prayer of petition are dangerous with young children because of their concrete thinking process. If they are told to pray hard for something and "God will hear their prayer," they expect God to answer and their request to be granted! As adults we know it does not work that way. God's answer is not always the one we want to hear.

If young children are praying very hard for someone who is ill and the person dies, it is easy for them to be angry with God and their faith to be undermined. Asking God to be with people who are ill is safer than praying for cures that might not come. Discourage the asking for material things like a bicycle, or to get a good grade. A sign in my office says "Pray as if it's all up to God, then work as if it's all up to you!"

Use comments to help stimulate children to pray. Show example by your behavior and speech that God is important in your life. Children learn more from example than from lecture. Don't save God for Sunday mornings only, or utter God's name only when exasperated!

Here are a few sample thoughts to get you started:

"Look at that beautiful _____(flower, sunset, etc.). Isn't God fantastic to give us such wonderful gifts?"

"Doesn't this _____(apple, cookie, cold water, etc.) taste good? Thank you, God, for mouths with which to taste things!"

"See all the different colors of flowers! How do you think God thought up so many colors? Thank you, God for our eyes to see Your beautiful world."

"God, I am feeling angry with my friends. Help me to love them even when they make me angry. Help us to talk about our feelings and be friends again."

©1999 by Marilyn Spaw Krock